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The Federal Railroad Administration on Monday estimated it would cost \$4 million for Chicago-area communities to comply with a proposed rule to prevent locomotive horns from being blasted as trains chug across northern Illinois.

But the estimate was greeted with skepticism by several local officials who contended their projections show the cost to be significantly higher.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) said indications are that crossing upgrades in several towns in his district alone would cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"It seems very low," Kirk said. "It does not appear to be grounded in fact."

The proposed rule would reinstate the blowing of horns at crossings where they're now banned unless certain upgrades are made to ensure safety. A numerical formula, based on the number of trains, vehicular traffic, frequency of accidents, type of warning devices and other factors, would evaluate risk at a crossing. If the score in a quiet zone is too high, the municipality could drop the whistle ban or make safety improvements to keep it in place.

If the Railroad Administration's cost estimate is correct, the financial burden associated with the proposed regulation would be significantly lower than the \$200 million that a train horn plan in 2000 was estimated to cost the Chicago region. That proposal was scrapped after a public backlash.

The cost associated with the latest proposed rule, which would go into effect in December, was the biggest issue to emerge in hearings held first in Western Springs and then Arlington Heights on Monday. During the first meeting, several area representatives questioned where they would get the money to make safety improvements.

"This leaves the funding on the backs of local governments," said Western Springs Village President John Kravcik.

FRA officials said after the meeting that it would cost about \$41.5 million nationwide over 20 years to keep the quiet zones in place.

"It's our best estimate," said Grady Cothen, FRA deputy associate administrator for safety standards.

Steve Kulm, an FRA spokesman, said the calculations were based on the theory that some communities--he could not say how many--would not maintain their whistle bans.

The analysis also figured that improvements to one crossing in a town would be enough to satisfy the safety criteria for a community to maintain its whistle ban.

It also theorized that communities could use less-expensive options, such as installing medians at \$10,000 or \$20,000 per crossing, rather than adding more crossing gates, an improvement the agency believes would cost \$100,000 to \$200,000, Cothen said.

Even if some communities drop their whistle bans, several officials said the FRA's cost estimates for the various safety upgrades are low.

Many believe adding more gates at a crossing could cost \$250,000 or more.

U.S. Rep. William Lipinski (D-Ill.), who attended the first hearing, said his staff has not analyzed the cost of the rule but said adding gates at 11 crossings on Chicago's Southwest Side and nearby suburbs would cost about \$3 million--a figure he called "astonishingly low." Because the proposed rule would affect quiet zones in 50 northern Illinois communities, that leaves only \$1 million, under the FRA's estimate, for all the remaining upgrades, he said.

The debate about the costs is the latest twist in the more than decade-old battle over whether

locomotives must sound their horns at crossings. The issue has been particularly contentious in northeastern Illinois, where trains running through populated areas are a familiar sight.

The controversy led Alan Rutter, head of the FRA, to appear at both hearings so he could listen to village, state and federal officials. He also heard from residents like Ed Ellis of La Grange, who came with a laptop loaded with digital photographs of people crossing railroad tracks on foot even though the safety gates were down.

"It's ridiculous," said Ellis, president of a small railroad company in Texas. "We spend \$1 million on crossings and it doesn't make any difference if people don't look."